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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China: Zhao Ziyang Struggling To Control the
Propaganda Apparatus [REDACTED]

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Summary

Recently appointed Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang is moving to assert his influence over the troublesome propaganda/ideology sphere. Zhao wants to muzzle his ideological critics and transform the party's conservative-oriented propaganda apparatus into a more effective proponent of reform and the "initial stage of socialism" theory. Zhao faces many obstacles and will probably be only partly successful in achieving long-term goals. Establishing the theoretical legitimacy of reform policies will be the most difficult to achieve. [REDACTED]

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Zhao's Goals

One of the most pressing tasks for Zhao Ziyang in his first months as General Secretary is to assert control over the propaganda machinery and, more broadly, over ideology. We believe he is trying to:

- Control major personnel appointments in the ideological sphere.
- Create a more credible propaganda apparatus, staffed by better educated and more professional workers, better able to explain the economic as well as ideological rationale behind key reform policies.

- Win acceptance of the legitimacy of the "initial stage of socialism" theory. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, Zhao stands to gain several advantages if he is successful. First, he would demonstrate strength, sending a clear signal to fencesitters in the party and government that the defeat of senior party ideologues, such as Deng Liqun, at the 13th Party Congress is being translated into policy and personnel

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changes at lower levels.¹ He would also demonstrate quick mastery of his new responsibilities, making it difficult for opponents to argue that Zhao, for all his qualifications as premier, is in the wrong job as party General Secretary. And he would turn the propaganda apparatus into an effective instrument for furthering reform. Zhao and other reform leaders have complained in numerous speeches that propagandists and theorists have fallen short both in generating new ideas and in writing convincing pieces in support of reform. We believe Zhao's overhaul of the propaganda machinery--especially the planned press reform law--is aimed in part at making it clear what Beijing expects from this sector. [REDACTED]

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Finally, Zhao would go a long way toward neutralizing what has been an effective weapon for his opponents and extending reformers' influence in an area where they have been weak and often subject to harassment. Many top propaganda officials, alarmed at reforms they believe have gone too far, have used their influence to snipe at reform. The reform wing has been especially vulnerable on theoretical grounds, and ideologues have from time to time managed to mount serious challenges to reform policies--such as during 1987's campaign against "bourgeois liberalization". [REDACTED]

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Early Moves

Zhao has already increased his control over propaganda and ideology:

- *Beginning with last October's party congress, several ideological hardliners in the leadership have been eased out of power.*
- *According to a well-connected Hong Kong paper, reformist Rui Xingwen has replaced the more orthodox Wang Renzhi as director of the Propaganda Department.*
- *Zhao has stacked the party's Propaganda and Ideological Work Leading Group with reform-minded figures, including his personal secretary Bao Tong, and appointed reform leader Hu Qili as its head.*
- *Propaganda reform has become a high-visibility issue, with conferences, leadership speeches, and instructions from the Central Committee to the media highlighting the importance--and desired direction--of changes.*
- *According to a pro-PRC Hong Kong paper, Zhao is attempting to close the party theoretical journal Red Flag--a conservative stronghold.*
- *Several reformist intellectuals who were attacked in 1987's anti-bourgeois liberalization campaign, including noted reporter Liu Binyan, have been invited to submit items for publication again.* [REDACTED]

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Stumbling-blocks

Although Zhao has made an ambitious start, we doubt that he can completely muzzle his critics. The ideologues have shown impressive resiliency, coming back more than once to mount new attacks on reform policies. Their support is not limited to party theoretical organs; we believe they have

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sympathizers throughout the party bureaucracy, especially in the powerful security apparatus and among at least some senior military leaders. The inevitable economic and social problems of reform will continue to provide opportunities to accuse reformers of promoting instability or fostering economic differences unacceptable in a socialist society. [REDACTED]

Despite Zhao's early gains, moreover, conservative influence within the propaganda apparatus is still strong. [REDACTED]

- *In discussions with Western newsmen and US consular officers, Chinese intellectuals have described continuing strict controls on research, contact with students, and publication. One likened the situation of Chinese intellectuals to that of a dog in a run--he can run as fast as he likes until he hits the fence, and "in China the fence is a high-tension wire."*
- *A conservative academic ally of former propaganda czar Hu Qiaomu--one of those retired at the 13th Party Congress--has been appointed head of the Theory Bureau of the Propaganda Department.*
- *Conservatives have retained control of the State Media and Publications Office, which oversees registration of publications and is charged with enforcing the law against illegal publications. Although the publications laws are officially aimed at controlling pornography and allocating scarce printing resources, their enforcement has naturally given the conservatives a powerful political tool.*
- *The staff of Red Flag has fought a delaying action against closure, and some Hong Kong press reports indicate that the journal may yet escape.* [REDACTED]

Reformist intellectuals, while they welcome the new initiatives to diminish hardline influence over propaganda and the invitation to publish again, remain wary. Liu Binyan told a Western newsmen that he expects another backlash campaign within the next year or two. A propaganda official told a US Embassy officer that even Hu Qili has to tread carefully because of the influence of party elders. [REDACTED]

Finally, one very important aspect of Zhao's campaign to control ideology and propaganda--gaining acceptance of the theory of the "initial stage of socialism"--has met with mixed success. The theory,² enunciated by Zhao at the 13th Party Congress, is the reformers' attempt to justify their policies in Marxist terms and protect their ideological flanks. It has been welcomed by some already committed to reforms as filling a long-recognized gap, but, according to an editor at the official party newspaper Economic Daily, other reactions have been much less favorable. Some party faithful, he said, believe the theory represents a tacit retreat from socialism; paradoxically others, mainly young intellectuals, have taken the theory to be simply a guise for pursuing capitalism; perhaps the largest group, according to the editor, sees the theory as an inconsequential hodgepodge of ideas. The more cynical intellectuals argue that the theory amounts to no more than a justification for the slowdown in reform. Finally, older party members resent the theory's implication that after 40 years of Communist rule China has not advanced beyond the "primary" stage. [REDACTED]

2. Very simply stated, the theory asserts that China is only in the first of three stages of socialism and that the primary task of this stage is economic construction. According to this theory, because of China's backwardness, any strategy that improves the economy, including adopting some capitalist methods, is justified because ultimately it advances socialism. [REDACTED]

Outlook

In our judgment, Zhao does not need to completely realize his wish list to reap major benefits. We believe Zhao knows that total victory is likely to prove elusive and that to press too hard is not worth the political risk. Propaganda and ideology questions are complex and messy, resonating beyond their specialized sphere to the gut issues of Chinese Communist Party control and legitimacy. Zhao will therefore, in our judgment, follow his normal cautious strategy, working to effect incrementally the changes he wants while compromising and even retreating occasionally. [REDACTED]

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Zhao is likely to be most successful in the short term in controlling propaganda tone and appointments. Given his position as General Secretary, the defeats suffered by senior ideologues in recent months, and the widespread lack of interest in and even disdain for ideology among Chinese today, we believe Zhao will succeed in moving propaganda in the direction of better supporting reform--forcing the ideologues to cease, or at least mute, their criticisms of reform policies. [REDACTED]

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Zhao's progress in fostering greater use of the propaganda apparatus to disseminate information and teach the populace about reform--what it means, what it will take, and what it will cost--is, we believe, likely to be slower and spottier. He has made a beginning--for example, one editor at Economic Daily said that the Central Committee has instructed his paper to be open and blunt in its coverage. publishing news that reflects realities China must acknowledge if reform is to succeed. [REDACTED]

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We see two problems that may dilute Zhao's gains in recasting the propaganda message. Many of the propaganda workers lack the education and training to play the teaching role Zhao envisions for them. Moreover, confronting reality in the media means carrying the unpopular message that China faces difficult problems requiring time and sacrifice. Thus, even skillful propaganda may meet an unreceptive audience, mitigating efforts to build popular support through education. [REDACTED]

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A different tactic for broadening public support for reform--creating channels for the expression of public opinion--holds more hope for success, we believe. Zhao has encouraged journals to print letters from readers, hold symposiums on topical issues, and conduct surveys. In our view, Zhao can accomplish several things through this strategy--increase the public's sense of participation in, and thus support for, reform decisions; provide a forum for airing grievances and publicizing corruption; encourage the exploration of new ideas; and help the leadership assess public reaction to its policies. [REDACTED]

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The muckraking aspect of Zhao's propaganda strategy will enable him to use the media increasingly to pressure reform opponents and obstructionist officials. This is a tactic reformers have used in the past, and, not surprisingly, it has created considerable dissension within the leadership. Besides being resented by party officials not used to having their judgments challenged by outsiders, some senior propaganda and party officials have argued that this kind of muckraking undermines the party's image and therefore threaten its control. Zhao's support for publications and individuals engaged in "investigative journalism" indicates that he is not sympathetic to these arguments and reckons that the benefits in inhibiting corruption--and encouraging compliance with reform policies--offset the drawbacks. [REDACTED]

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Zhao can make some progress toward professionalizing the propaganda workers, but he will have to commit greater material and political resources than he has been willing to. The propaganda/ideology sector is bidding against other crucial--and more attractive--career tracks for China's scarce supply of educated talent. Zhao will have to find ways to make the propaganda field attractive to young college graduates, overcoming its inherent drawbacks--high political visibility, and therefore risk; low pay; declining status and clout. On the plus side, journalism offers opportunities for coveted foreign travel, and the example of men such as Liu Binyan has inspired some younger Chinese to see journalism as a worthwhile career. [REDACTED]

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Liberalization of control over the press has helped to attract some young talent. Although China still has a controlled press controls are looser. As one young reporter put it, he may not be able to write everything he wants, but he no longer has to write what he doesn't want. As an example, he cited coverage of last year's forest fire. Before, he said, he would have had to write about the glorious efforts of heroic firefighters, ignoring casualties and the costs of the fire. Under the newer rules, he was free to write articles exposing the bungling of the firefighting effort. [REDACTED]

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We believe political opposition will delay but not derail the professionalization drive. The political obstacles in the propaganda organs are common to other reform efforts to overhaul China's bureaucracies. Workers and officials who lack the new qualifications resist their adoption; moreover, they often fight major changes in the way they do their work. In the case of propaganda work, sloganizing has served as a mainstay for so long that it is difficult to get even younger propagandists to drop that style completely, although almost everyone recognizes that few Chinese take it seriously. [REDACTED]

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Where Zhao is least likely to succeed, we believe, is in establishing the initial stage theory as ideological orthodoxy. As long as he is politically powerful, he can enforce lipservice to the theory, but we are skeptical that the theory will ever generate enthusiasm. For the short term, this may not be crucial, because the role of ideology in China has been reduced considerably. [REDACTED]

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Over the longer term, however, the reformers' ideological shakiness may hurt them, particularly given the conservatives' proven comeback ability. Reformers will continue to need a convincing ideology to answer conservative attacks, particularly when these strike a responsive chord among large numbers of people--for example, on the sensitive issue of growing income inequalities. Also, as reform moves into an era when costs to significant sectors of the population mount, a persuasive theoretical base can help convince people of the necessity, and long-term advantages, of the policies. Finally, when bad times hit, a sounder ideological footing would help preserve claims to legitimacy of a leadership that has relied mostly on material successes. [REDACTED]

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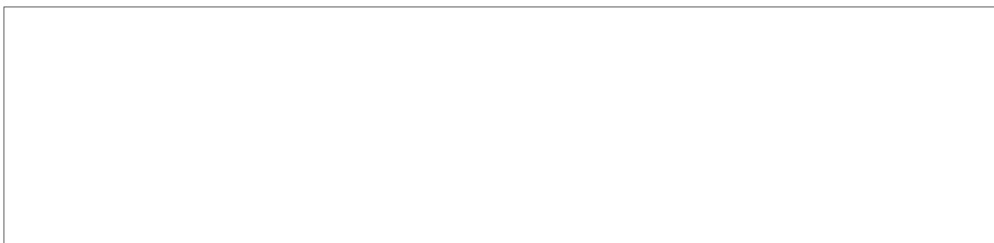
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- 1 - [Redacted] DB-2B, DIAC, Bolling AFB, Room C2-835
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